

A HOMILY IN KING'S COLLEGE CHAPEL

Barnabas

Without doubt Barnabas was one of the heroes of the earliest days of Christianity. When he was travelling with Paul people thought that the two of them were Greek gods come down to earth. And while we all know that Paul was a larger than life character, it was Barnabas who was considered the senior: Jupiter to Paul's Mercury, Zeus to Paul's Hermes.

Neither of them were intimate associates of Jesus or personally commissioned after the resurrection. But both were called and sent to do God's work in the world; to continue the mission of Jesus Christ far beyond the region of Galilee or the walls of Jerusalem. That's why they are called 'apostles'.

They were tough, intrepid individuals. They travelled by land and sea, got rough treatment at the hands of the elements and even rougher treatment from the authorities in the cities. They were macho partners in the project of taking the good news of God's love shown forth in Jesus Christ to the gentiles. And it wasn't long before they had the most almighty row and parted company.

The cause of the row is instructive. A younger man called John Mark had let them down. 'That's it,' said Paul. 'We can't rely on John Mark anymore. We leave him behind'. 'I disagree,' said Barnabas, 'let's give him a second chance'. 'Don't be ridiculous,' says Paul. 'Don't tell me what's ridiculous', says Barnabas. And so on and so on, getting angrier and angrier, until they split up and Barnabas says to John Mark, 'Come with me. I'm going to trust you and see what happens.'

Barnabas is a hero of the faith for this capacity to trust others and to encourage those who needed encouragement. In the very earliest days of the church he sold everything he had and gave it to community. This was an act of great generosity. Originally named Joseph, the Christians re-named this generous Jew from Cyprus, 'Barnabas', or 'son of encouragement'.

When Paul first converted to Christianity he had a huge reputation as a zealous persecutor of the church. His name struck fear into many hearts. Barnabas was one of the first to take the risk of trusting him: a kindness that Paul seemed to forget when it came to the John Mark crisis.

To trust is always to take a risk. And we might think that it's better to avoid risks. But the question isn't whether we take risks or not; it's the kind of risks we take. Some take the risk of never trusting other people. That's a way to avoid getting hurt, but it is also the way to avoid getting help.

Barnabas is remembered as one who trusted, but just as significantly he is remembered as one who encouraged others. And maybe the two go together. Certainly we don't feel encouraged when people don't trust us. The act of trust is an implicit willing of someone on to do well, to be their better self, to step up to the plate and to be reliable - even if they have previously been unreliable.

The early Christians lived through demanding days. They knew persecution and hardship; were passionate about their new beliefs and they fell out with each other just as vigorously. Paul thought it all through theologically, and gave endless instruction and wrote many letters trying to pull it all into shape.

Barnabas, on the other hand, is remembered for generosity, trust and encouragement. Both had a part to play, but it is Barnabas whom I urge you to emulate.

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Acts 11.22-end; John 15.12-16*